

**A Novice's Progress**  
**Dunstaffnage to Tobermory on Montaraz**  
**By Mairi Macleod**

**Skipper:** Steve Bramwell

**Crew:** Donnie McLeod,  
Mairi MacLeod (the novice)

A soft breeze and mirror-still waters greeted us as we motored out to Montaraz: our home for the weekend. The sun was already setting over Dunstaffnage as we unloaded our kit and explored Steve's well-equipped and comfortable Nicolson 35.

As the evening quietly descended, I perched myself on the front of the boat with a beer and serenaded the hills with a slow air on the small pipes as Donnie slaved over a hot stove in the galley. Spirits were high as delicious aromas wafted up from down below.



**The Great West Coast Cook-Off. Part One: Bolognese A La  
Chef McLeod**



**The Skipper reviewing the charts for our course tomorrow.**

After wolfing down the culinary triumph that Donnie had created, we adjourned to the cockpit to toast the rising moon with a couple of fine drams. As the stars winked into life, warm smiles and good banter kept the early autumn chill at bay. A happy crew and an excellent start to the weekend.



**Drams and stars**

**Dunstaffnage Sunrise**

Waking up to this – can life get any better?





Rising in the morning to an azure sky and misty hills, the able crew of Montaraz were ready and raring to go for a full day of sailing after a hearty fry up. Just one catch – no wind! We would have to motor out. Steve coaxed the engine into life and she purred away happily; so at 9am we eased the grand old lady off the mooring and out into the blue beyond. Able Crewman McLeod took the helm as we glided across calm waters towards Lady Isle.



**Donnie in 'Ernest Shackleton' mode**



**Looking back. What lies ahead?**

The ancient and forbidding walls of Duart Castle loomed over us as I took the helm and Steve and Donnie unfurled Montaraz's generous wings. We were ready to fly and the Sound of Mull awaited...

Suddenly, the weather closed in and, despite the radiant rainbow stretching over the Sound, dark clouds were descending from the north west, bringing strong winds, at 3 to force 4 gusting 5, and vicious squalls with them. We

fumbled for our heavy weather gear and I was grateful that I had invested in an excellent coastal jacket.

Montaraz however, took it all in her stride, living up to her name (roughly translated as 'Wild Rover') riding the rolling waves like a marauding Viking ship of old and soon we were romping past Lochaline at a respectable 6 knots. Steve, our generous host, kept the spirits up with hot coffee and cookies as the chilling northwesterly winds continued their onslaught. Meanwhile Donnie, looking for all the world like he was out for a quiet afternoon's sailing on the firth, took the helm and a spirited Montaraz responded well to his experienced handling.

The wind was gusting force 5 against the tide, and soon a large, gut-wrenching swell developed. Whilst Steve and Donnie were having a 'swell time', I was beginning to feel the early stages of seasickness; clearly, I had left my sea legs at home in the cupboard. Still, I endeavored to keep a smile on my face – only 4 hours until we reach the calmer waters and safe haven of Tobermory!

Thankfully, my crewing duties were keeping me from dwelling on my discomfort as the wind was heading directly down the Sound. On this 'journey of a thousand tacks' I gained plenty of valuable experience hauling in the headsail as we gradually made our way up towards Tobermory. As the wind picked up, gusting at force 6, Steve put in a reef in the genoa to counteract weather helm and a more docile Montaraz settled herself down once more.

Finally, after a challenging but exhilarating afternoon of sailing 22.3 nautical miles, we finally slipped into Tobermory harbour at 4pm.

To our delight, the Tobermory Skiff Regatta was in full swing and we took the opportunity to have a natter and exchange notes with our friends and fellow skiffers from Ardersier. After which I was whisked off to the Mishnish Hotel for an 'initiation pint' or, in my case, a medicinal ginger beer! The day was rounded off in excellent style with a delicious curry

cooked by Captain Bramwell and an early night for sleepy eyes and tired bones.



### **What's the story Tobermory?**

We were once again greeted by sunshine and a sapphire sky in the morning as Montaraz bobbed gently against the pontoon. Breakfast was eaten with relish as we looked forward to an easy day of flying back down the Sound with the wind behind us.

Sure enough, today the Sound and the wind were on our side. As we eased Montaraz out of the harbour at 9:15am into the open waters, Steve poled out the headsail and set her on a run.

She glided majestically down the Sound to the soothing sounds of the Beatles for a good two hours and I leapt at the chance to take the helm in the calmer conditions. The bacon butties were coming thick and fast thanks to Steve in the

galley so I had to quickly master the essential seafaring skill of keeping her on course whilst eating a bacon roll and drinking coffee. I'm sure it's in the RYA handbook somewhere...



**It's a hard life.**

The wind dropped just as we were approaching Lochaline, so we popped the engine on and tucked the sails away.

Following the unofficial nautical rule that, just as the headsail is rolled in and the main secured the wind will pick up, we were treated to an unexpected gust. Steve set her into action and Montaraz bowled on eagerly at a nimble 7 knots as she flowed into a broad reach serenaded by Tom Waites on the stereo - ample compensation for the challenges of the previous day; a happy crew and smiling faces all round.



We were given another treat in the form of a classic gaff rigged ketch that passed by as she headed up the Sound, doing battle with the awkward head wind we had encountered the day before...



The relaxed atmosphere did not last however, because we were soon to encounter our final challenge on this voyage: at the mouth of the Sound a maelstrom was gathering pace. Three tidal flows were coming together in a 'Devil's Cauldron' of rushing waters akin to rushing river rapids. I was at the helm, blithely ignorant of the perilous witches brew we were crashing towards.

Suddenly, Montaraz started to buck and roll like a frightened mare in a thunderstorm. With the wind bombing on behind us she powered onwards into the fray and I knew I was losing control. The wheel was becoming unresponsive and erratic as the conflicting tides clashed with each other in the battle raging beneath us. I worked hard to anticipate her

next move and avoid an accidental gybe as the head and main sails flapped and floundered dangerously. This was getting scary. My pride and determination wanted me to continue, but my common sense knew it would be folly. A more practiced hand was needed and I called for the Skipper to relieve me – I was very relieved!

All the same, Steve really had to work the wheel to keep her on course and guide her through the tumultuous waters. Knowing we were in safe and experienced hands however, allowed us to enjoy the adrenaline rush of this natural rollercoaster ride. My furrowed brow was soon replaced by a very broad grin!

As Montaraz's slim hull effortlessly cut through the last of the tidal waters, she settled once more and gamely romped home towards Dunstaffnage with a bone in her teeth and the sound of 'Hector the Hero' on the small pipes floating on the breeze.

Delicious food, great sailing and easy company – happy days!